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Sixteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 331st MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 29 January 1997, at 5:30 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. KHAN

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The meeting was called to order at 5.30 p.m.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ARTICLE 21 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Awori (Deputy Assistant Administrator and Deputy Director of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, United Nations Development Programme) and Ms. Heyzer (Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women) took places at the Committee table.

2. The CHAIRPERSON recalled that, at the previous session, the Committee had emphasized the importance of strengthening its working relationship with the United Nations specialized agencies and programmes which focused on the implementation of the Convention. The Committee was particularly interested in forging a stronger relationship with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and looked forward to cooperation with it in dealing with poverty and structural adjustment programmes, which were among the areas envisaged by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Committee was especially interested in UNDP activities in countries whose reports it was considering. Moreover, the UNDP offices in various countries could help to publicize the Committee's work, thus contributing not only to the fulfilment of the Committee's mandate, but also to strengthening the foundation of sustainable development.

3. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was the only specialized body which had a mandate for the advancement of women with a focus on women's human rights. One year after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it was time to monitor the implementation of the commitments made by Governments; the Committee would need the cooperation of UNIFEM in order to play that role more effectively. UNIFEM could also assist the Committee by disseminating information on the Convention and the Platform for Action. The Committee's new role, as mandated by paragraphs 322 and 323 of the Platform for Action, made it necessary to obtain more information from local sources. In considering country reports, the Committee needed to be aware of the situation in each country and the major obstacles to be addressed. UNIFEM could be instrumental in initiating the positive changes that needed to take place in a country following its ratification of the Convention, in a manner similar to the role played by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in relation to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

4. Ms. AWORI (Deputy Assistant Administrator and Deputy Director of the Bureau for Policy Programme Support, United Nations Development Programme) said that UNDP had a two-pronged approach to the empowerment of women and the elimination of sex discrimination, namely building country capacity in order to strengthen the legal framework for gender equality in the 134 countries to which UNDP provided assistance and improving women's access to resources and decision-making.

5. The primary objective of UNDP was the elimination of poverty which was the most serious challenge faced by the majority of the world's women. As stated in the Beijing Declaration, the eradication of poverty required the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centred sustainable development.

6. The Beijing Platform for Action had marked a major shift in emphasis. Women were no longer viewed merely as reproductive agents, but also as major economic actors. That shift had generated an increasing demand for research and data on women and work in order to support policy analysis and planning. UNDP deemed it essential to strengthen statistical and data bases in order to overcome the unequal valuation of women's paid and unpaid labour.

7. The 1995 Human Development Report had shown that, despite the major strides made over the past half-century in narrowing the gap between men's and women's capabilities, the economic and political opportunities for women remained restricted. The UNDP Gender in Development Programme, Human Development Report Office and Regional Bureaux were collaborating with statistical offices in countries that had requested assistance in strengthening their labour and production statistics. UNDP looked forward to receiving requests for such assistance from Member States. Such work went beyond household labour; it included subsistence-sector family labour, which was essential to poverty elimination strategies and food security, informal-sector activities, home work, which was increasing with globalization and new technologies and self-employed and voluntary work.

8. In endeavouring to place people at the centre of development, UNDP had been obliged to question the exclusion of economic factors vital to the achievement of sustainable and balanced development. One such factor was social capital, in other words, a nation's stock of cooperation, trust, love, networks and organizations which, if not present, made life in a country unbearable. Currently, those factors had no economic value.

9. Women predominated in the "care economy", which tended to be unpaid or undervalued, and which men tended to avoid because of its low status. Power was by far the most valued principle; those who exercised power were deemed to be successful, while caring for family or the elderly was not considered a mark of success. Such values were held by both men and women. Given the current scheme of values, it was unlikely that the full implications of the care economy for macroeconomic policy would be taken into account.

10. UNDP had taken the first step in bringing human values into the economic equation. She drew attention to a booklet entitled Sustainable Human Development and Macroeconomics which was distributed by UNDP country offices. The challenge facing women was to examine those new concepts, discuss them with male colleagues and governments and find ways to ensure their recognition.

11. Ms. HEYZER (Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women), after paying tribute to the former Chairperson, Ms. Corti, for her tireless advocacy on behalf of the Convention and the Committee, said that the Beijing Conference had given UNIFEM a mandate to review and strengthen its work in the light of the recommendations contained in the Platform for Action, and to focus on women's political and economic empowerment. In the context of its Programme on Women's Human Rights (UNIFEM) had developed a strong action plan for 1997-1998 which recognized that the Convention constituted a "bill of rights" for women.

12. The Programme focused on three main areas: mainstreaming women's human rights into the United Nations human rights mechanisms, eradicating violence against women and promoting the Convention. In that context, UNIFEM had

identified several key objectives, namely, increasing coordination between United Nations bodies working to strengthen the Convention, achieving universal ratification of the Convention, supporting the withdrawal of reservations, strengthening the work of the Committee and supporting the withdrawal of reservations, strengthening the work of the Committee and supporting the development of an optional protocol to the Convention. UNIFEM was working with women's organizations to develop ways in which they could use the Convention in their advocacy work.

13. Specifically, UNIFEM sought to provide technical assistance to groups working for women's human rights by facilitating exchanges between members of the Committee and non-governmental organizations and supporting the participation of women's rights advocates in national, regional and international meetings. UNIFEM also supported the dissemination of action-oriented information on the Convention and the Committee to women's groups and United Nations agencies through training workshops, the fostering of partnerships and exchanges between experts in different regions, and the dissemination of best practices regarding the Convention and the Committee's work.

14. Among the organizations of the United Nations system, UNIFEM was uniquely suited to working with the non-governmental community and the Committee in mobilizing support for the Convention. Its Regional Programme Advisers in developing countries were often called upon to serve as mediators between women's organizations, governments and other members of the United Nations system. The Fund's commitment to enhancing its collaboration with such partners as the Division for the Advancement of Women, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund and UNDP also strengthened the effectiveness of its work.

15. During the current session of the Committee, UNIFEM and the International Women's Rights Action Watch for Asia and the Pacific had undertaken a pilot project to bring eight observers from six countries whose reports were or would soon be under consideration by the Committee to New York for one week. The aim of the project had been to strengthen the observers' understanding of the Convention and the Committee's working methods and to raise their awareness of ways in which they could support the Committee and its work. Several participants in the project had brought with them independent, alternative information prepared by their non-governmental organizations which she hoped had proved useful to the Committee.

16. Since the Beijing Conference, there had been an increasing demand on the part of women's non-governmental organizations for more information and training in relation to the Convention. In that context, she looked forward to the outcome of the Committee's debate on ways and means of expediting its work.

17. Ms. CORTI said that the cooperation of UNIFEM had been very important for the pilot project under which, for the first time, women from various non-governmental organizations had attended the session of the Committee; those women could carry out valuable advocacy work for the Convention when they returned to their countries. Since some of the countries in which UNDP was active still had not ratified the Convention, she hoped that UNDP would join the advocacy efforts of UNIFEM in that area, which had been very effective. UNDP

should also join UNIFEM in working to persuade countries to withdraw their reservations to the Convention.

18. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING said that UNIFEM had taken a very important initiative in bringing to Headquarters, to observe the current session, women from countries whose reports the Committee would consider in the near future. Since the reports of some countries were as much as 15 years overdue, the Committee would try, at its next session, to devise a procedure for encouraging countries to overcome the obstacles that prevented them from preparing their reports. She hoped that UNIFEM and UNDP would help to address that situation, which was of serious concern.

19. The reports considered at the current session showed that even some highly developed countries did not clearly understand how to present their reports. The Committee could not evaluate a country's situation unless information was provided not only on the efforts undertaken, in terms of government programmes and policies, but also on their impact, in terms of the percentage of women affected by each measure. She asked UNIFEM and UNDP to address that issue in their efforts to assist States parties in the preparation of reports.

20. She wanted more information on the work of UNDP in identifying methods of recognizing women's work in the home. It was extremely important to show how much work was done by women and to find ways to make that contribution visible. On the other hand, experience in some European countries had shown that the valuation of women's work in the home could become a symbolic policy issue, insofar as little monetary value was attached to such work. The valuation process was not intended to create a society in which all caregiving work must be paid for at its market value, but it should have some practical consequences. However, there was a danger that conservative forces could treat the process as an end in itself and avoid taking action. It was therefore necessary to ensure that women's unpaid work was always evaluated within a policy framework so that the findings would have a direct impact in areas such as divorce law and women's access to pension benefits, credit and training.

21. Ms. ABAKA asked whether UNIFEM was in a position to implement the programmes it envisaged, since it was severely under-funded. Non-governmental organizations and women in developing countries were especially appreciative of UNIFEM because of its grass-roots programmes and the importance of its presence. However, UNIFEM was under-represented in those countries; for example, only one UNIFEM representative was assigned to cover the entire West African subregion. She asked whether UNDP was planning any initiatives to enhance the status and increase the funding of UNIFEM so that it could promote the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women as effectively as UNICEF promoted the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

22. Ms. ESTRADA CASTILLO said that she agreed with the representative of UNDP that democracy was a prerequisite for the achievement of equality and equity and that education and awareness, in turn, were prerequisites for democracy. She therefore asked UNDP and UNIFEM to consider the possibility of implementing large-scale education and information programmes, especially in developing countries. She hoped that, despite their financial difficulties, the regional offices of UNIFEM would make efforts to increase their valuable assistance to Governments and non-governmental organizations.

23. Ms. TALLAWY said that some of the country reports under consideration at the Committee's current session had shown that a backlash against women's programmes had emerged in both developed and developing countries, under the pretext of economic restructuring and the abolition of the welfare system, and was very detrimental to the situation of women in general and poor women in particular. She hoped that UNDP and UNIFEM would pay due attention to that concern in their country reports and project evaluations and that they would undertake consciousness-raising efforts to sensitize decision-makers in that regard. She was concerned about the financial situation of UNIFEM, which had also suffered from that backlash, and hoped that its budget, staffing and activities could be increased.

24. Ms. AWORI (Deputy Assistant Administrator and Deputy Director of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, United Nations Development Programme) said that she was aware of the problems posed by cutbacks in initiatives for women, notably in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Many UNDP programmes focused on supporting the women's institutions that remained in those countries. UNDP collaborated closely with UNIFEM and sought to strengthen the latter without compromising its obligation to comply with international conventions and General Assembly recommendations. Each UNDP country office had a gender focal point who was responsible for ensuring that the Programme's work was gender-sensitive. She encouraged the Committee members to be outspoken in expressing their concerns to the UNDP resident representatives in their countries. Lastly, UNDP was implementing a major programme on governance and democracy, one of whose objectives was to ensure that new democratic systems provided for the full participation of women.

25. Ms. HEYZER (Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women) said that UNIFEM and UNDP had developed cooperation mechanisms to strengthen their partnership. UNIFEM focused on investing its scant resources in critical areas in order to bring about systemic changes for the benefit of women. It also sought to innovate and to mainstream the lessons drawn from such innovation, as well as women's values and vision of the future. Its efforts for the economic and political empowerment of women took place in three areas; building women's economic strength and capacity, especially with regard to economic globalization and new technologies; governance and leadership, to shape decision-making on issues affecting women; and women's human rights (including political, social and economic rights and the right to health and development).

26. UNIFEM also identified opportunities and barriers for women's advancement in the countries in which it was active, which presented a wide variety of market conditions and political situations. It was especially important for women in countries which were making the transition to democracy or to a market economy to be involved in the creation of new institutions and new forms of participation. It was also important to set up accountability mechanisms based on legal provisions, including the Convention, and to ensure that the Convention was taken as seriously as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Cultural traditions should not impede the observance of women's rights, since they did not impede the observance of children's rights.

The meeting rose at 6.20 p.m.